

HOST GERI MITCHELL: Our next story is about Nico DiMarco. Like many white-collar Washingtonians, DiMarco has a creative side gig – he’s a DJ, and a rather successful one at that. But if you met him on the street, you might not expect him to have a career in music. Why?

NICO DIMARCO: I’m a 4th generation deaf person from a deaf family.

MITCHELL: We’ll let WAMU’s Arts and Culture reporter Mikaela Lefrak take it from here.

MIKAELA LEFRAK: DiMarco has loved music ever since he was a little kid. He and his brothers would pile into their mom’s car and put the radio on full blast. His mom would move the dial until she got to one of his favorite channels – late 90s pop or hip hop.

<< “Bye Bye Bye” by NSYNC >>

LEFRAK: The car would vibrate with sound.

DIMARCO: And I’d find a rhythm, and tell my mom, stay with that channel. LEFRAK: Were you an NYSYNC or a Backstreet Boys kind of guy? DIMARCO: Oh, I can’t pick one!

LEFRAK: DiMarco can’t hear music, but he *can* feel the vibrations thumping through his body. That’s why he was always asking his mom to turn up the music, pump up the base.

DIMARCO: We’d tell her to turn it on full blast, put it on max. My family was always pretty surprised, they say, are you sure you don’t hear?

LEFRAK: He’s sure. He can’t hear melody, lyrics, anything. The voice *you* hear right now is actually an American Sign Language interpreter who sat in on our interviews. We met a few times at DiMarco’s alma mater, Gallaudet University in Northeast DC. Its student body is deaf and hard of hearing. DiMarco loved the culture there.

DIMARCO: I’d rather just have it up front. I’m a Deaf DJ. I’m proud to be Deaf.

LEFRAK: D.C. has one of the largest communities of deaf and hard of hearing people in the country, due to Gallaudet. DiMarco started DJing when he was in college there. Through technology, music is a big part of campus life. Audiology professor Larry Medwetsky is hard of hearing himself. He says, if you walk around campus today you’ll see lots of kids with headphones on.

MEDWETSKY: You didn’t see that before, but the output levels are such that they can hear it. Or feeling it in their ears. But they’re enjoying music.

LEFRAK: Undergrads blast music at their parties and hire DJs like DiMarco to play at events. There’s even a device that people can wear on their backs that helps transmit musical vibrations into their body.

MEDWETSKY: The more deeper sounds are being perceived lower in the body, and the higher pitch notes are perceived higher up, like in the neck area, so it can flow up and down. That’s what makes the experience more enjoyable.

LEFRAK: DiMarco doesn't wear one of those devices, but he does use huge subwoofers and amps to get the music pumping in his apartment and out at clubs.

DIMARCO: Huge! If I turn it on, you're going to feel that. Your whole body will feel that rhythm.

LEFRAK: The technology that really changed things for him was an iPhone app called Shazam. It came out about a decade ago. If you haven't used it, you hold your phone up as a song is playing and the app identifies it almost immediately. When DiMarco feels a rhythm he likes, he Shazams it and check out the lyrics. Sometimes he is shocked.

DIMARCO: I look at lyrics sometimes and I'm like what?! That's not a song for everyone.

LEFRAK: Unintentionally playing a scandalous song in front of kids or at a wedding? That's one challenge of being a deaf DJ. Another one is volume. When he DJs for mixed audiences, sometimes the hearing people can't handle the level of sound that deaf people need in order to feel the music. DiMarco's learned to keep earplugs around to give out.

But a lot of times, audiences don't even know he's deaf. << sound of the bar rises up >> I went to see him perform at a DC brewery earlier this year, and people in the crowd like Josh Baker and Kelsey Dwyer were really surprised to find out.

BAKER: It's amazing, because I like didn't even know until you said anything that he was deaf. It's not like any different experience from the listener perspective.

DWYER: He's obviously doing an awesome job.

LEFRAK: DiMarco also loves inspiring deaf and hard of hearing people to dance. His Instagram is filled with videos of him dancing, and most requested songs usually have set choreography – think electric slide. People just feel more confident when they know what dance moves to do. The number one request he gets? A little song called the Wobble, by V.I.C.

<< “The Wobble” by V.I.C. >>

DIMARCO: People will go nuts and jump on the floor to dance to that, because they know how to dance to that song. It's a Deaf thing.

LEFRAK: It's kind of an everyone thing. DiMarco still works full-time as a government IT specialist, and DJs in the evening and on weekends. He's really happy with the life he's created here in D.C.

DIMARCO: I don't mind being a Deaf DJ. because very often -- people don't get that Deaf people can do anything. So I just try to represent my community and do everything I can to help them visualize a future that's broad, without limits.

For WAMU, I'm Mikaela Lefrak.

<< “The Wobble” >>